

ADULT LEARNERS ARE ASKING FOR A CLEARER PATH TO VALUE

What Tri-C's new survey suggests about enrollment growth, adult learner needs, and program design

From the Office of Institutional Progress and Effectiveness
Cuyahoga Community College

Adult learners are looking for value they can understand and use

This essay summarizes preliminary findings from Tri-C's new Adult Learner Survey, based on roughly 300 responses from students age 30 and older who enrolled in either credit or non-credit courses. The survey gives the College a more direct view of why adults come to Tri-C, what they value, where they experience friction, and what kinds of programs, schedules, credentials, supports, and career connections would make Tri-C easier to choose and easier to complete.

Adult learners are looking for a path whose time, cost, schedule, credential value, and next steps are clear before they commit. They want education that is affordable, flexible, and connected to work, but the survey points to something more complete than those familiar terms suggest. Adults are asking whether the schedule fits their life, whether the credential can be used, whether prior experience counts, whether payment and financial aid are understandable, whether someone can help them navigate the process, and whether the learning connects to employment, advancement, personal confidence, enrichment, or a larger credential later.

That makes the adult learner opportunity both encouraging and demanding. The survey suggests that many adults still see value in Tri-C. They are seeking advancement, changing careers, returning after earlier educational stops, building confidence, meeting employer expectations, pursuing personal interests, and looking for learning that matters to them. At the same time, their responses suggest that value becomes harder to act on when the path is difficult to understand, difficult to schedule, difficult to finance, difficult to navigate, or difficult to connect to a clear next step.

This is where the survey connects directly to Tri-C's enrollment future. The Huron Consulting Group market analysis found that working adults, especially those ages 30 to 39, represent a major opportunity for Tri-C, with strong intent to enroll and lower yield shaped by time, cost, and process barriers. The survey helps explain what those barriers may feel like from the adult learner side. Adults are not simply choosing among institutions. They are deciding whether education is realistic under the conditions of their actual lives.

Adult learners are practical, varied, and often already experienced

The survey makes clear that adult learners are not a single type of student. Some are trying to advance in their current field. Some are trying to move into a different field. Some want a credential they can use quickly. Some are trying to complete something they previously started. Some need training for an employer requirement. Some are retired or semi-retired and taking classes for personal enrichment. Some are trying to regain confidence after time away from school. Some already have degrees, prior credits, licenses, certifications, military experience, work histories, caregiving responsibilities, and decades of practical knowledge.

This matters because Tri-C's adult learner strategy cannot be built around a flat image of adults as though all are seeking the same thing. Many adult learners are highly pragmatic. They want to know whether a program will help them earn more, qualify for a better job, prepare for a promotion, change fields, meet an employer requirement, or build a credential with recognizable value. But the survey also shows a wider human purpose. Adults want to know that their time is respected, that their prior experience matters, that they will not be asked to repeat unnecessary steps, and that the College understands they are not beginning from the same place as a recent high school graduate.

The distinction between younger traditional-age students and many adult learners is important. A younger student may come to Tri-C to explore, prepare, discover a field, transfer, or build toward a career they hope to love. Adult learners may also care about purpose and identity, but many of them are coming because something in their working life needs to change. The survey suggests that if many adults could get the labor-market upgrade they are seeking without returning to Tri-C, they might do so. That does not make their commitment weaker. It makes the value test more immediate.

For this group, the question is not whether education is good in the abstract. The question is whether Tri-C can help them move from where they are to where they need to go without asking them to absorb unnecessary time, cost, confusion, or delay.

The adult learner value test is larger than program availability

Colleges often think about adult learners through programs. That is understandable. Programs are how colleges organize curriculum, credentials, faculty expertise, enrollment targets, labor-market alignment, and student outcomes. But adult learners experience the offer more holistically.

A working adult is likely to ask a cluster of questions before enrolling, sometimes explicitly and sometimes silently. "How long will this take? What will it cost me out of pocket? Can I take the required courses at night, on weekends, online, or in a hybrid format that does not waste my time? Are the courses offered predictably, or will I be delayed because a required class is not

available when I need it? Will my previous college work, work experience, military experience, certification, or license count? Will I have to take placement tests or developmental coursework that feel disconnected from my goal? Can someone help me understand the difference between credit, non-credit, certificates, degrees, employer-valued credentials, and the fastest route to my objective? Will this actually help me get a job, promotion, internship, apprenticeship, certification, or wage gain? Can I reach a real person when I get stuck?"

Those questions define the adult learner offer. A program with strong labor-market value may still fail adult learners if required courses are offered at times they cannot attend. A low-cost program may still feel unaffordable if financial aid, payment plans, employer benefits, or required upfront expenses are unclear. An online program may still fail to feel flexible if students experience it as self-teaching with weak communication. A short certificate may still have limited value if adults cannot explain what skills it represents or how it connects to an employer-recognized role.

The survey therefore points to a strategy question rather than a simple recruitment question. Tri-C's adult learner opportunity depends on whether the College can make the path clear enough, fast enough, flexible enough, supported enough, and useful enough for adults to act on the interest they already have.

Shorter credentials with labor-market value are central to the opportunity

One of the most important patterns in the survey is the adult learner interest in shorter-term credentials that lead to related skills, help with employment or advancement, and can later count toward a larger credential. This should be read as a major strategic signal.

Adults are not asking only for shorter versions of existing programs. They are asking for lower-risk entry points that produce usable value. The shorter credential matters because it can be completed in a realistic period of time. The labor-market connection matters because many adults are seeking movement in work, wages, role, or confidence. The stackability matters because adults do not want a short credential to become a dead end. They want the first step to count.

That combination has profound implications for Tri-C. It suggests that adult learner growth will depend less on asking adults to enter a multi-year program as their first commitment and more on designing pathways in which a short, meaningful, employer-legible credential can become the first completed milestone. For many adults with immediate labor-market goals, a multi-year program presented as the primary or only route will not be a compelling offer. The longer degree may still matter, and for some fields it will remain necessary. But the adult learner pathway has to begin with a usable first step that can be completed, explained, and applied.

This is also where Tri-C's work on learning outcomes, durable skills, credentials of value, and employer legibility becomes directly relevant. A short credential has limited value if it simply repackages courses without making clear what a student can do at the end. It becomes more valuable when the skills are visible, the employer connection is credible, and the credential can be explained in ordinary language. Adult learners need credentials they can use. Employers need to understand what those credentials represent. Advisors need to be able to explain how short credentials connect to longer pathways. Faculty need to know that shorter credentials still reflect serious learning. The public value of the credential depends on all of these audiences being able to see the capability behind the award.

The bridge between non-credit and credit is becoming a central design issue

Tri-C has already begun important work to bridge non-credit enrollment activity with credit-bearing pathways. That work should be treated as central to the adult learner strategy, not as a technical side issue.

Many adults may prefer to begin with non-credit training because it feels faster, more practical, less intimidating, and more directly connected to employment. That can be a major strength if non-credit learning is connected to later credit, if the skills are documented clearly, and if students can see how the first credential can lead to a larger certificate, degree, licensure pathway, apprenticeship, or promotion. It can become a weakness if non-credit and credit remain difficult to compare, difficult to move between, or dependent on insider knowledge.

The adult learner survey reinforces the need for a clearer front door. Adults should not have to understand Tri-C's internal structures before they can make a good decision. They should be able to describe their goal and receive guidance about the best starting point. For some, that starting point may be a short-term non-credit credential. For others, it may be a credit certificate, an associate degree pathway, a transfer path, or a customized employer-supported option. The key is that the path should be guided by the learner's goal, timeline, prior experience, and intended use of the credential.

The Huron analysis reinforces this point by identifying clearer non-credit-to-credit pathways, credit for prior learning, course scheduling and modality, and a more adult-sensitive enrollment process as operational levers needed to make the adult learner message true in practice. The strategic opportunity is to make credit and non-credit work together as parts of one adult learner system rather than as separate doors that adults must learn to navigate on their own.

Placement and developmental coursework need to be reconsidered for adults with labor-market goals

The survey also raises a sensitive but important question about placement testing and developmental coursework for adult learners with immediate labor-market goals. Many adults are not coming to Tri-C for a broad exploratory college experience. They are coming because they need a credential, skill, job change, certification, promotion, or wage gain. When the first institutional response is a placement test followed by developmental coursework that does not appear connected to that goal, the College risks losing adults before they ever reach the learning they came to pursue.

This does not mean lowering standards. It means aligning the entry process with the purpose of the pathway. For adults pursuing a workforce-aligned credential, the starting point should not default to a traditional remediation sequence unless that sequence is clearly necessary for success, safety, licensure, or progression. In many cases, the better design may be a short labor-market credential with embedded academic support, contextualized math or writing, just-in-time skill development, co-requisite support, or assessment of whether the adult already possesses the needed capability through work, military, certification, or prior learning.

The question is especially important because adults often have less tolerance for time that feels disconnected from their purpose. A younger student may accept developmental coursework as part of a longer college preparation process, although even there the model deserves scrutiny. An adult seeking a labor-market upgrade is likely to ask a different question. “Why am I being delayed from the training or credential I came here to complete?”

Tri-C should take that question seriously. The adult learner pathway should begin by asking what the adult is trying to accomplish, what capability is actually required for the first credential, what the learner already knows, and what support can be embedded into the pathway rather than placed in front of it as a separate barrier.

Adult learners need part-time pathways that are designed rather than improvised

The survey also points toward a broader issue in community college design. Many adults will attend part-time. They may be working, parenting, caregiving, managing health concerns, navigating transportation, or trying to preserve income while they study. The problem is not that adults attend part-time. The problem is that many college pathways are still organized around assumptions that fit full-time attendance better than adult life.

Tri-C therefore needs pathways and programs intentionally designed for part-time students and working adults. That means more than offering a few evening or online sections. A real adult pathway has to show whether the student can complete the credential on a realistic

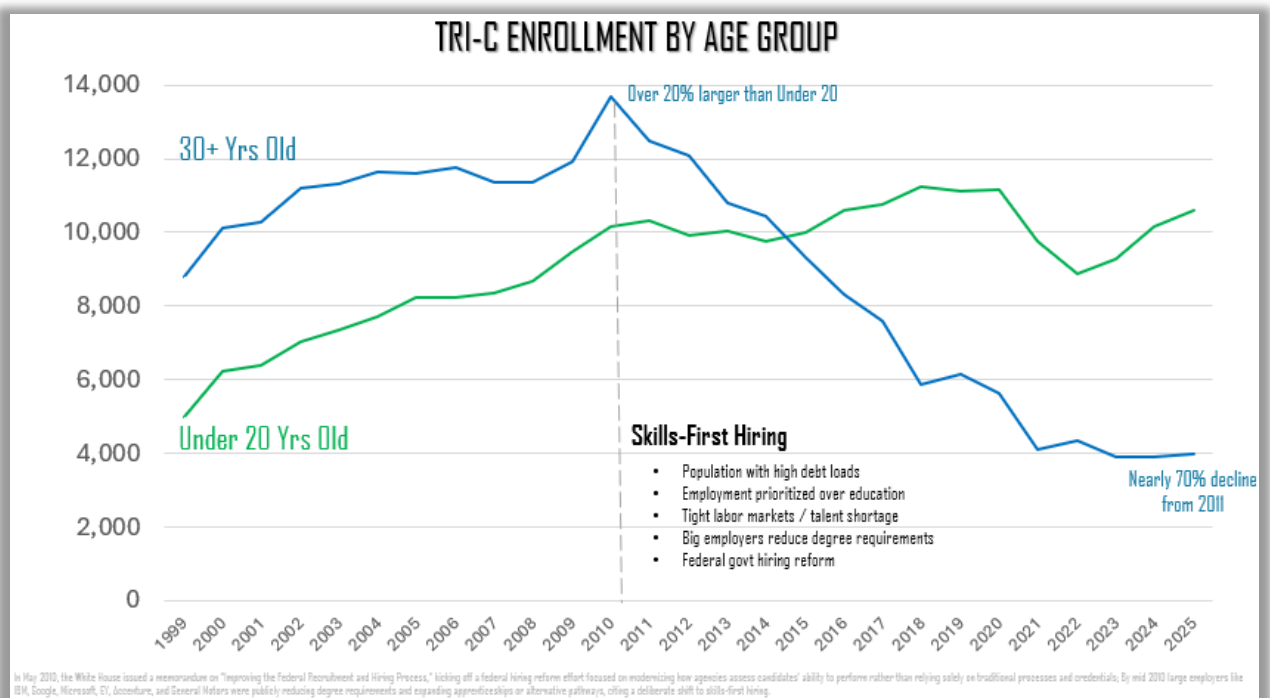
part-time schedule, whether required courses are offered in a predictable sequence, whether labs and clinicals can be completed without impossible travel or work conflicts, whether the student can pause and return without losing momentum, and whether each milestone produces value along the way.

This is where the difference between an option and a pathway matters. A menu of courses gives adults choices. A pathway tells them what comes first, what comes next, how long it will take, what each milestone means, and how the credential can be used. Adult learners need that structure because many are making decisions under time pressure. They may know the field they want to enter but not the credential they need. They may know they need a better job but not whether the fastest route is credit, non-credit, a certificate, an associate degree, a licensure pathway, or an employer-supported program. They may be willing to start small, but only if the first step clearly builds toward something larger.

A part-time adult pathway should be designed around movement. A student should be able to move from inquiry to guided choice, from guided choice to registration, from registration to completion of a short credential, from that credential to employment or advancement, and from that milestone into a larger certificate or degree if the student chooses to continue. At each point, the student should be able to see the next step.

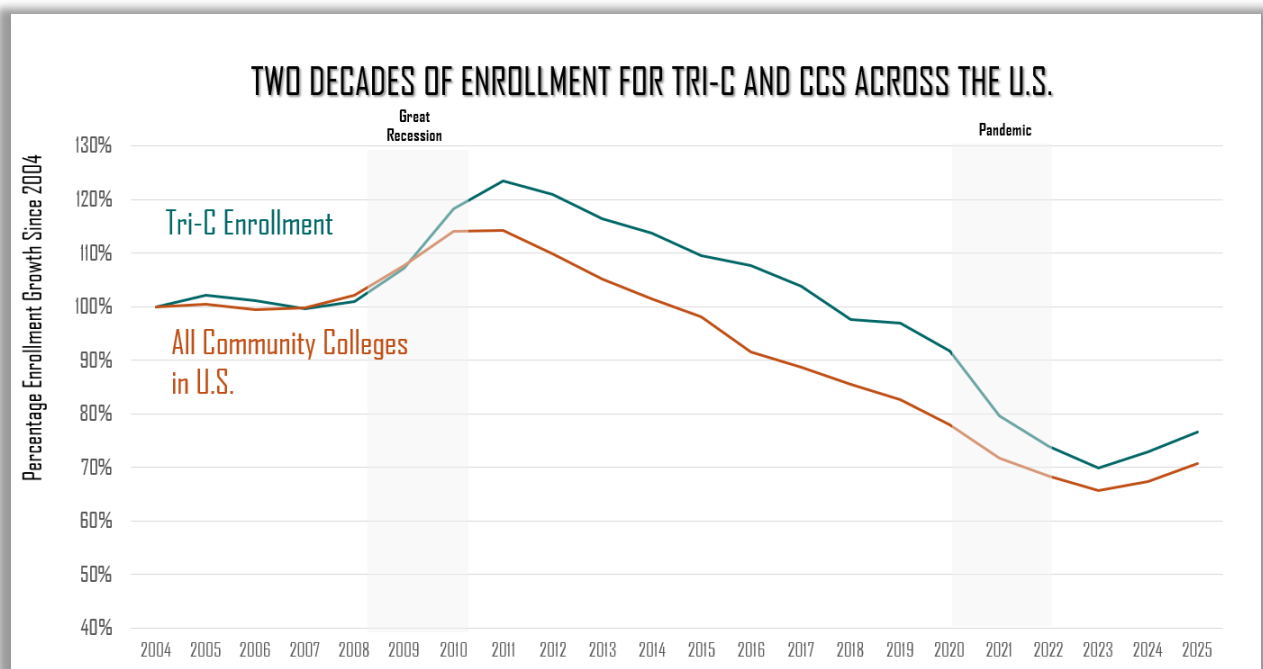
Adult participation has changed sharply enough to make this a strategic issue

The survey findings matter because adult learner participation has changed substantially over time. Adult learners once represented a larger part of Tri-C's student body. The decline in



students age 30 and older is not a minor enrollment shift. It is one of the central changes in who the College is reaching and serving.

The broader community college context reinforces the point. Tri-C's enrollment decline occurred within a national community college downturn, but recovery should not be expected simply because the market may eventually improve. The post-2011 labor market changed the adult learner decision environment. Adults now have more alternatives, including employer training, internal promotion pathways, apprenticeships, online providers, short-term bootcamps, informal learning, and jobs that may not require immediate college enrollment. For adults who need income now, work itself can look like the more rational choice unless the college offer is unusually clear and usable.

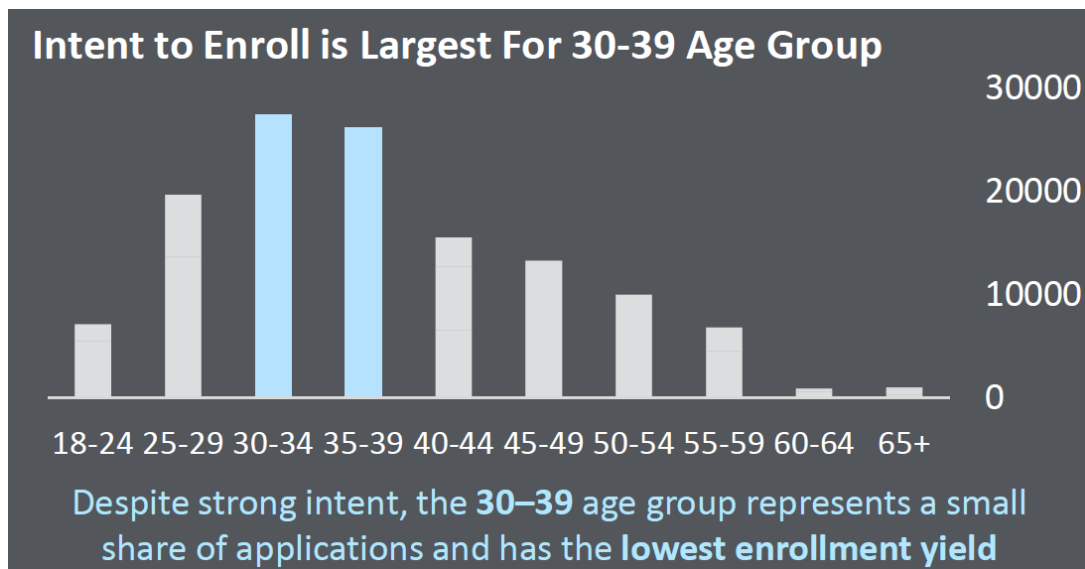


This is why the adult learner survey should be read as enrollment evidence, not only as student feedback. The survey helps identify what adults need in order to act on interest. It also shows why the College cannot rely only on its traditional strengths. Affordability matters, and Tri-C has a real advantage there. But affordability alone will not be enough if adults cannot see the path, fit the schedule, understand the credential, get credit for what they already know, or move quickly enough toward a labor-market outcome.

Intent exists, but conversion depends on the experience Tri-C creates

The Huron market analysis sharpens this issue by showing that working adults, especially those in their 30s, represent a high-intent population for Tri-C. The key interpretation is not simply that adults are interested. It is that interest alone does not produce enrollment. Adults

may intend to enroll, but they still need a pathway that feels worth the time, cost, disruption, and uncertainty required to act on that intent.



The figure should be read as an institutional design challenge. A high-intent, low-yield adult population is not only a marketing audience. It is a group whose experience must be easier to enter, navigate, trust, and complete. If adults are interested but not enrolling at the level the market suggests is possible, the question becomes whether the offer is clear and feasible enough.

Huron’s analysis also identifies “no school” or “workforce” as a major competitor, especially for adult learners and applied-not-registered students. That finding matters because many adults are not choosing between Tri-C and another college in a traditional sense. They are choosing between Tri-C and continuing to work without enrolling, trying to advance through an employer, using a different training provider, or postponing education entirely. For these learners, Tri-C has to make the case that enrolling will produce enough value soon enough to justify the disruption.

Personal enrichment also belongs in the adult learner strategy

The survey also suggests that more than a few adult learners are looking for personal enrichment as their primary goal. That finding should not be treated as a distraction from the labor-market strategy. It is part of the adult learner reality.

Some adults return to education because they want a better job. Others return because they want to learn something meaningful, build confidence, stay intellectually engaged, participate in the arts, explore a long-deferred interest, or remain connected to a community of learning.

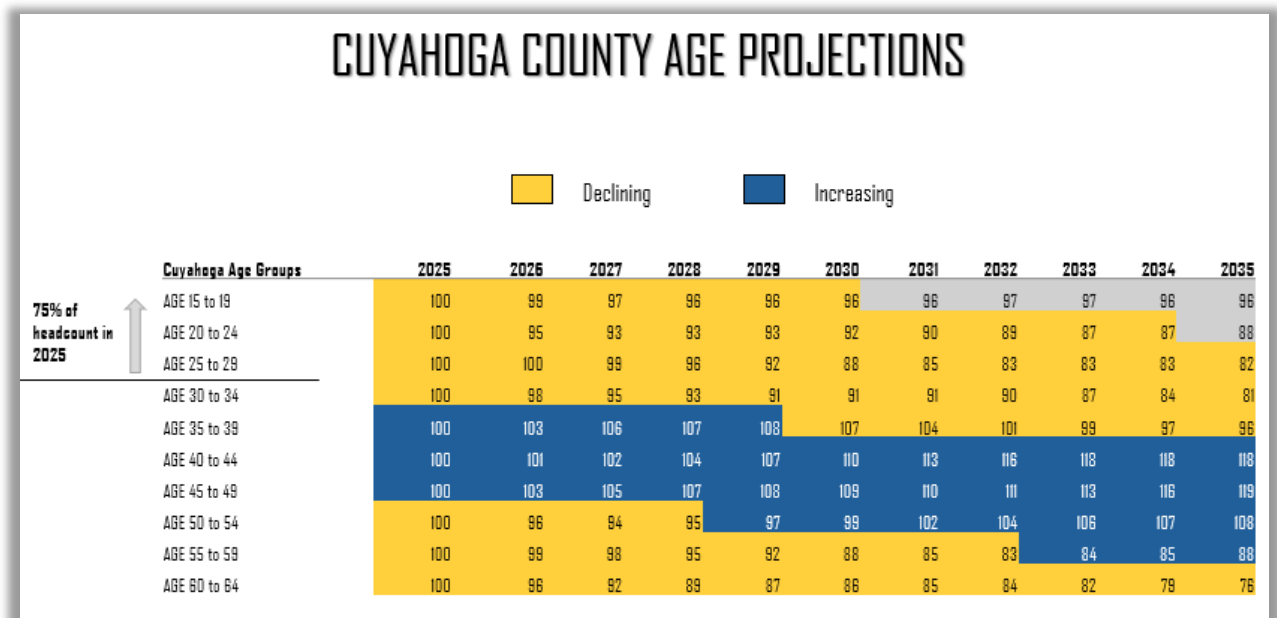
Tri-C’s adult learner strategy should have room for that purpose, especially given the College’s broader mission and its role as a community institution.

The strategic distinction is that personal enrichment and labor-market advancement may require different offers. Adults seeking a job upgrade need fast, clear, stackable credentials with employer-recognized value. Adults seeking enrichment may need accessible courses, welcoming entry points, flexible formats, and low-friction registration. Both groups need clarity and respect for time, but the measure of value differs.

Recognizing this distinction can help Tri-C avoid forcing all adult learners into one framework. A strong adult learner strategy would include career-connected pathways for adults seeking mobility and accessible enrichment pathways for adults seeking learning, purpose, creativity, and connection. The common design principle is usability. The learner should be able to see what is offered, why it matters, how to enter, what it costs, how long it lasts, and what kind of experience to expect.

Demography makes the adult learner opportunity more urgent

Tri-C cannot rely on traditional-age enrollment alone to rebuild long-term enrollment strength. As younger pipelines remain constrained, the College will need to convert existing adult intent more effectively and serve working adults in ways that are realistic enough to produce enrollment, completion, employment movement, and continued learning.



The projection should also be read carefully. The adult learner opportunity should not be treated as an automatic growth pool that will enroll simply because the region contains more

adults. Adults have alternatives and constraints. They are not waiting passively for a college offer. Tri-C's opportunity will depend on whether the College can make the adult learner pathway clear, flexible, valuable, and supported enough to compete with other uses of time and money.

Adult learners need short, stackable, adult-compatible pathways

The survey points toward an adult learner offer built around a simple but demanding promise. An adult should be able to come to Tri-C with a goal, understand the fastest credible route toward that goal, complete a meaningful first credential, use that credential in the labor market or in their personal life, and continue into a larger pathway if continued study makes sense.

That promise depends first on shorter, stackable credentials with recognizable value. For many adult learners, the first step cannot be a multi-year commitment whose payoff is distant and uncertain. The first step has to be a credential that can be completed in a reasonable period of time, that signals skills employers understand, and that can later count toward a certificate, degree, license, or advancement pathway. The strategic issue is not simply whether Tri-C has short credentials. It is whether those credentials function as meaningful milestones rather than isolated course bundles.

The same principle applies to scheduling. Adult-compatible schedules are not a convenience added after the program has been designed. They are part of the academic product itself. If required courses, labs, clinicals, or prerequisites are offered at times adults cannot attend, the pathway is not truly adult-serving, no matter how strong the program may be. Evening, weekend, hybrid, selected fully online, compact-term, and predictable course sequences matter because they determine whether adults can realistically complete what Tri-C is asking them to begin.

The connection between credit and non-credit is also central. Many adults may be best served by starting in a short-term workforce program, while others may need a credit certificate, degree pathway, transfer route, or employer-supported option. The adult learner should not have to know Tri-C's internal distinctions in order to make a good decision. The College's responsibility is to create a guided front door where the learner's goal, timeline, prior experience, and intended use of the credential help determine the right starting point.

Prior learning belongs in that same design. Adult learners bring work experience, military experience, certifications, licenses, earlier credits, and informal learning that may be highly relevant to their goals. A strong adult learner offer does not ask them to start over by default. It gives them a visible, academically sound, and worthwhile way to have prior learning reviewed and, where appropriate, applied toward their pathway. The point is not to lower

standards. It is to avoid making adults pay in time and money for learning they can already demonstrate.

This also has implications for placement and developmental coursework. Adults with immediate labor-market goals should not be routed automatically through entry processes that delay them from the credential they came to complete unless those steps are clearly necessary for success, safety, licensure, or progression. Where academic support is needed, Tri-C should look first to embedded, contextualized, co-requisite, or just-in-time models that help adults succeed inside the pathway rather than requiring them to complete disconnected preparatory work before the pathway begins.

Navigation is the connective tissue across all of this. Adults need people and systems that can help them understand program choice, credit and non-credit options, prior learning, financial aid, payment, schedules, career goals, and next steps together. A student who is transferred from office to office may experience the College as fragmented even when every individual unit is trying to help. For adult learners, the quality of guidance is part of the offer.

Career connection is equally important for those seeking labor-market movement. Adults need to see how a credential connects to jobs, promotions, wage gains, internships, apprenticeships, employer partnerships, and changing workplace expectations. That connection has to be visible before enrollment, reinforced during the program, and supported at the point of completion. For adults pursuing personal enrichment, the equivalent promise is different but just as important. They need accessible, welcoming learning experiences whose purpose, cost, schedule, and expectations are easy to understand.

Finally, Tri-C's adult learner offer has to include re-entry. Some adults have already applied, stopped out, completed part of a pathway, or left before earning a credential. For them, the College may not need to create interest from the beginning. It may need to make return feel possible. That means a clear next step, a review of prior progress, a realistic schedule, and a credential goal close enough to justify coming back.

Taken together, these elements describe a different kind of adult learner experience. The work is not only to recruit more adults into existing structures. It is to design pathways in which adult learners can see the value, enter without unnecessary confusion, complete a meaningful first milestone, and decide from a position of progress whether to continue.

Adult learner growth will require operational ownership

The adult learner opportunity is large enough to matter strategically, but too cross-functional to succeed through general encouragement. If every unit owns part of the adult learner experience but no one owns the whole pathway, the work can easily become fragmented. This

is why the adult learner strategy needs clear operational ownership. Tri-C should identify a limited number of priorities that define the adult learner offer and assign responsibility for moving each one from concept to implementation. Those priorities should include short stackable credentials, adult-compatible scheduling, credit and non-credit pathways, prior-learning assessment, adult learner navigation, career and employer connection, and re-engagement of adults who expressed interest but did not enroll.

The point is not to create another large committee structure. The point is to create enough ownership, cadence, and decision authority that the College can see whether the adult learner experience is actually changing. The most important measures would not be only final enrollment numbers. They would include whether adults move from inquiry to application, from application to registration, from registration to first successful course completion, from first credential to employment or next credential, and from stopping out to re-entry.

Tri-C has strong data capacity. The adult learner strategy should use that capacity not only to describe the problem but to manage the redesign. The College should be able to see where adults are getting stuck and return to those points often enough to adjust before another enrollment cycle passes.

The opportunity sits between adult intent and adult experience

The most important finding is not simply that adult learners want flexibility, affordability, career relevance, and support. Those findings are important, but not surprising. The deeper finding is that Tri-C's adult learner opportunity sits between intent and experience.

Adults are interested. Many see value in Tri-C. Many are trying to improve their lives, change careers, complete unfinished goals, meet employer expectations, pursue personal interests, or gain confidence through learning. But interest alone does not produce enrollment. Enrollment depends on whether the offer is clear enough, flexible enough, supported enough, and valuable enough for adults to move from intention to action.

That is the work ahead. Tri-C does not need to abandon its broader mission to serve adult learners well. It needs to make that mission more operationally concrete. It needs to translate affordability into a full cost and payment story. It needs to translate flexibility into schedules and modalities that can actually be completed. It needs to translate credentials into employer-legible capability. It needs to translate support into a guided first mile. It needs to translate prior learning into visible time and cost savings. It needs to translate career relevance into real employer connection. It needs to translate personal enrichment into accessible learning experiences that adults can enter without unnecessary friction.

The adult learner survey should therefore be read as both encouragement and warning. The encouragement is that adults still see Tri-C as valuable. The warning is that value must be easier to see, easier to enter, easier to navigate, and easier to use. The adult learner opportunity is not only to attract more students. It is to design an offer worthy of the adults Tri-C hopes to serve.

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